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Taft, William Howard

Message to Congress, Industrial Relations

[New York]

[1912?]

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Message to Congress Industrial Relations

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Recommendation by the President
in a special message to 62d Congress
of a Federal Commission on Industrial Relations

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

Published by the
Committee on Industrial Relations
Room 607 Kent Hall
Amsterdam Ave. and 116th St., New York

Committee on Industrial Relations

TO SECURE THE APPOINTMENT OF A

FEDERAL COMMISSION ON INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

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2-25-12
3-25-12

Cav. Mar 1923.

Extract from the President's Message

February 2, 1912

"The extraordinary growth of industry in the past two decades and its revolutionary changes have raised new and vital questions as to the relations between employers and wage earners, which have become matters of pressing public concern. These questions have been somewhat obscured by the profound changes in the relations between competing producers and producers as a class and consumers—in other words, by the changes which, among other results, have given rise to what is commonly called the trust problem. The large scale producing characteristic of modern industry, however, involves the one set of relations no less than the other. Any interruption to the normal and peaceful relations between employer and wage earner involves public discomfort and in many cases public disaster. Such interruptions become, therefore, quite as much a matter of public concern as restraint of trade or monopoly.

"Industrial relations concern the public for a double reason. We are directly interested in the maintenance of peaceful and stable industrial conditions for the sake of our own comfort and well-being; but society is equally interested, in its sovereign civic capacity, in seeing that our institutions are effectively maintaining justice and fair dealing between any classes of citizens whose economic interests may seem to clash.

"Railway strikes on such a scale as has recently been witnessed in France and in England,

a strike of coal mine workers such as we have more than once witnessed in this country, and such a wholesale relinquishing of a public service as that of the street cleaners recently in New York, illustrate the serious danger to public well-being and the inadequacy of the existing social machinery either to prevent such occurrences or to adjust them on any equitable and permanent basis after they have arisen.

"In spite of the frequency with which we are exposed to these dangers and in spite of the absence of provision for dealing with them, we continue to assume with easy-going confidence that in each new case, somehow or other, the parties to the dispute will find some solution which will be agreeable to themselves and consistent with the public interest. We all see the grave objections to strikes and lockouts, however necessary they may be in extreme cases; and we are ready to criticise the more extreme phases of the industrial conflict, such as boycotts and blacklists; but we leave the situation such that industrial disputes lead inevitably to a state of industrial war in which these are the only weapons left to the two combatants. No more clumsy or expensive method of determining the rate of wages and the hours and conditions of labor could well be devised. The successful operation of the Erdman act as between interstate railroads and their employees shows how much good can be done by proper legislation.

"At the moment when the discomforts and dangers incident to industrial strife are actually felt by the public there is usually an outcry for the establishment of some tribunal for the immediate settlement of the particular dispute. But what is needed is some system, devised by patient and deliberate study in advance, that will meet these constantly occurring and clearly foreseeable emergencies—not a make-shift to tide over an existing crisis. Not during the rainstorm, but in fair weather should the leaking roof be examined and repaired.

"The magnitude and complexity of modern industrial disputes have put upon some of our statutes and our present mechanism for adjusting such differences—where we can be said to have any mechanism at all—a strain they were never intended to bear and for which they are unsuited. What is urgently needed to-day is a re-examination of our laws bearing upon the relations of employer and employee and a careful and discriminating scrutiny of the various plans which are being tried in several of our own states and in other countries. This would seem to be the first natural step in bringing about an adjustment of these relations better suited to the newer conditions of industry.

"Numerous special investigations, official and unofficial, have revealed conditions in more than one industry which have immediately been recognized on all sides as entirely out of harmony with accepted American standards. It is probable that to a great extent the remedies for these conditions, so far as the remedies involve legislation, lie in the field of state action; but such a comprehensive inquiry as is necessary to furnish a basis for intelligent action must be undertaken on national initiative and must be nation-wide in its scope.

"In view of the results that have followed the activities of the federal government in education, in agriculture, and in other fields which do not lie primarily within the field of federal legislation, there can be no serious argument against the propriety or the wisdom of an inquiry by the federal government into the general conditions of labor in the United States, notwithstanding the fact that some of the remedies will lie with the separate states, or even entirely outside the sphere of governmental activity, in the hands of private individuals and of voluntary agencies. One legitimate object of such an official investigation and report is to enlighten and inform public opinion, which of itself will often induce or compel the reform of unjust conditions or the abatement of unreasonable demands.

"The special investigations that have been made of recent industrial conditions, whether private or official, have been fragmentary, incomplete, and at best only partially representative or typical. Their lessons, nevertheless, are important, and until something comprehensive and adequate is available they serve a useful purpose, and they will necessarily continue to be made. But unquestionably the time is now ripe for a searching inquiry into the subject of industrial relations which shall be official, authoritative, balanced, and well rounded, such as only the federal government can successfully undertake. The present widespread interest in the subject makes this an opportune time for an investigation, which in any event can not long be postponed. It should be non-partisan, comprehensive, thorough, patient, and courageous.

"There is already available much information on certain aspects of the subject in the reports of the federal and state bureaus of labor and in other official and unofficial publications. One essential part of the proposed inquiry would naturally be to assemble, digest, and interpret this information so far as it bears upon our present industrial conditions. In addition to this the commission should inquire into the general condition of labor in our principal industries, into the existing relations between employers and employees in those industries, into the various methods which have been tried for maintaining mutually satisfactory relations between employees and employers and for avoiding or adjusting trade disputes, and into the scope, methods, and resources of federal and state bureaus of labor and the methods by which they might more adequately meet the responsibilities which, through the work of the commission above recommended, would be more clearly brought to light and defined."

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